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In a democratic society, critical listening should have top priority among the four language skills (speaking, reading, writing, and listening). This paper provides a history of critical listening and an application of critical listening in the classroom for the future citizen's involvement in a democratic society. Six critical listening experiences (class activities) for training citizens in a democratic society are attached. (NKA)

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"Training Citizens In a Democratic Society to Listen Critically"

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This paper provides a history of critical listening. It provides application of critical listening in the classroom for future citizen's involvement in a democratic society. It also provides experiences to develop student competencies in critical listening.

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## Training Citizens In a Democratic Society

## To Listen Critically

**By Bob Bohlken, Ph.D.**

In a democratic society, critical listening should have top priority among the four language skills (speaking, reading, writing and listening). Plato, an Athean philosopher, recognized the importance of critical listening when he advocated "dialectics" (the overt interaction between the communicators) above "rhetoric" (persuasive oratory). Although he did not use the term "critical listening" he developed the concept. Plato contended that "meaning" and "motivations" are equal responsibilities of both communicators and not just that of the speaker.

Critical listening got its national recognition in the United States in the late 1930's. Prior to World War II both England and Germany were vying through the radio for the attention of sympathy of the citizens of the U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt commissioned scholars to form an "Institute for Propaganda Analysis." The Institute's objectives were to make citizens aware of attempts by British and German sympathizers to sway their minds and to educate them on how to listen critically to detect bias or subjective messages. The Institute developed an analysis which categorized semantic/linguistic elements that created unwarranted prejudice and acceptance. It provided and described seven "propaganda devices" of which the American radio-listening audience should be aware. Since the devices were intended for the masses, the Institute chose descriptive terms which were common but also abstract.

The first device warned about highly-connotative, negative terms used to describe the opposition. They labeled it "name-calling" and the category included such concepts as "atheist," "fascist," "heathen," "socialist," bigot," "marxists," "ignorant," "lazy," and "pessimistic."

The second device, "Glittering Generalities" described highly connotative, favorable concepts which were broad and abstract in nature and intended to create a positive perception of the user. This category included terms such as "republic," "God fearing," "free," "justice," "hardworking," "optimistic," and "democratic."

"Transfer" is the third device. It associates favorable qualities of a concept or object with the source of the message. This category would include quoting the Bible, U.S. Declaration of Independence or U.S. Constitution.

"Testimonial," the fourth device, refers to quoting the testimony or expressed ideas of individuals who are famous but have little if any expertise in the subject matter being quoted. Some examples are George Bush on the quality of panty hose and their durability, or President Clinton being quoted on the nutrients of gourmet peanuts.

"Plain folk," the fifth device, uses vernacular and dialect to associate cause with audience. This devise includes the use of rural idioms such as "it'll all come out in the wash," "they don't have a leg to stand on," "it's a bitter pill to swallow," and "it's a pork barrel deal."

"Card stacking," the sixth device, presents the listeners with only one side of the situation and gets its name from a corrupt poker player. The card stacker will present the advantages or qualities of an individual, cause or product but will not address the

disadvantages. It is like a drug company presenting what a particular drug does without a word about the drug's side effects.

The final propaganda device is "bandwagon." This concept, working on our urge to conform with others, is based on the idea that in the olden days the bandwagon was the last item in a parade and the crowd of observers of the parade would join the parade following the bandwagon. Examples of "bandwagon" include "everybody is doing it" and "don't be left out, join the crowd."

As you can determine by the following experience, the "propaganda devices" were ubiquitous and nebulous in nature. Besides, their purpose was never developed nor wide spread since the U.S. soon became allies with Britain, and German propaganda (information) became socially unacceptable.

Try to categorize these isolated statements as to the appropriate propaganda device. As you do this realize how much more difficult critical listening would be using this method within a verbal context.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| (name calling) | 1. | Only a lying atheist hypocrite would say that. |
| (transfer) | 2. | As stated in the Bible "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." |
| (Bandwagon) | 3. | Piercing and tattooing are in because everyone seems to be doing them. |
| (Glittering generalities) | 4. | As a full blooded American, I promise you liberty and freedom within the area of my authority. |
| (Testimonial) | 5. | President Clinton has stated "Puffed Wheat is the most nutritious cereal made." |
| (Card stacking) | 6. | Capital Punishment alleviates the prison expense and overcrowded prisons. |

(Plain folk) 7. As your ole buddy; I promise "a chicken in every pot" for my constituents.

Borrowing from the Propaganda Institute, Robert Gorham Davis, Wendell Johnson, and many others, I propose the following criteria for critical/comprehensive listening:

1. awareness of quantification
2. awareness of degrees of abstraction and specificity
3. awareness of attribution
4. awareness of qualifying statements
5. awareness of comparison

The critical listener must be aware of the speaker's use of quantification. There are two types of qualifiers - precise numerical concepts and pseudo quantifying terms. Precise numerical and absolute terms can be conceptualized by the listener. They include numbers, fractions, percentages and words that represent complete or total quantities such as "none," "all," "everyone," "nothing," and specific references to time and date ("3 PM, January 14, 1935"). Precise quantifiers possess a set standard value that can be directly appraised and compared. Pseudo quantifiers represent that which only seems to be or appears to be measurable or numerable but which is a deceptive resemblance. Pseudo quantifiers provide no specific comparable or tangible referent of a set, standard value.

Pseudo quantifiers include "many," "several," "few," "majority," "large," "small," "limited," "much," "more," "thousands," "scores," "lots," "very large crowd." If the

speaker uses precise quantifications the listener accepts or rejects the data; however if the speaker uses pseudo quantification the listener needs to question the data. E.g.

1. Some of the judges stated she won.

2. Three of the five judges stated she won.

Although language is symbolic and inherently abstract, the awareness of the degree of abstraction and specificity requires the critical listener to distinguish perceivable and specific concepts from intangible and general concepts. This criterion is somewhat related to "Name Calling" and "Glittering Generalities." Examples of abstract terms are "freedom," "beauty," "justice," "honor," and "religion"; all of which have more than ten denotation and far more individual connotation. Abstractness is associated with the context in which the meaning of a word is developed and experienced. When the critical listener hears figurative language, the message is more interesting but less specific, concrete or objective. If my advice to you as a critical listener were "keep your ear to the ground and don't let this message go in one ear and out the other" you would have to guess what I am implying, and you would not take it literally. Vernacular or jargon is another element of abstraction of which the critical listener must be aware. Consider these two examples: 1) "Because of the physician's therapeutic misadventure and incomplete success in treating the ballistically induced aperture of the subcutaneous environment, the patient experienced a terminal episode" (Because the physician failed to treat the bullet wound appropriately the patient died.) 2) Take your portable hand held communication inscriber and provide this fiscal underachiever with a financial remuneration expression (take your pen and write the poor person a check).

The critical listener needs to be aware of the source of the message whether it be the speaker or someone who is quoted within a message. To whom is the message or quoted material attributed? One needs to consider the speaker's credibility including his/her expertise (related to the propaganda device "testimonial") character (motivation about the audience) and "goodwill" (caring about the audience). When listening to quoted material the critical listener should consider specificity of the source, the data the source was quoted and the context (both real and verbal) or the syntax of the attribution. Often we unjustifiably accept messages that are attributed to abstract sources such as "It has been reported..." "Authorities state..." "Sources close to ... indicate" or the most common one in conversation, "they say...." In political campaigns we often hear an opposing candidate being quoted from material stated ten years ago. The critical listener needs to question whether or not the statement is currently applicable. He/she must also determine if the excerpt of the message being quoted is truly the intention of the message. In the fall of 1999, VP Gore was quoted by the media as saying "I was the one that started it all" in reference to toxic dump clean up. The context of the message was in a speech to Niagara Falls, NY High School students and his statement "that was the one that started it all" referring to a youth's letter that prompted him to hold congressional hearings on toxic dumps like the Love Canal. Instead of bragging, VP Gore was making the point that they, the youth, can make a difference.

Perhaps the greatest and most common characteristic of a message for which a critical listener should be aware is the qualified statement. The qualified statements lack objectivity or concreteness because they are conditional, exceptional, hypothetical and/or contingent on the context. Qualified statements include those that have introductory or

modifying words such as "apparently," "perhaps," "if," "reportedly," and "allegedly." Qualified statements include statements with the verbs "appears," and "seems" or those with conditional or judgmental auxiliary verbs such as "could," "should," "would," "may," "might," and "must." The counterpart of qualified statements are the unqualified statements which are indicative, unconditional and not contingent on context. Label the following statements as to whether they are unqualified or qualified.

1. The air conditioner was invented in 1906 by Willis Carrier.
2. Perhaps, there may have been other air conditioners before the 1900's.
3. If I were President and I may be someday, I would think about spreading the wealth.
4. I think I overheard someone say he thought you may have won the election
5. Today's fast food concept started in an A & W root beer stand at Sacramento California in 1923.

The last of our criteria for critical listening is an awareness of literal and figurative comparisons. I.A. Richards contends that language is inherently the process of association and comparison. Every time the message uses the linking verb "be" (is, was, are, were) it is making a comparison of the subject with the predicate. For our purposes, we warn the critical listener about the two types of comparisons, literal and figurative. The literal comparison is referred to as an analogy; whereas, the figurative comparison is referred to as a metaphor. A literal comparison is comparing the boxers Mohammed Ali with Joe Lewis; whereas, comparing Joe Lewis' "swing" with a rusty gate is a figurative comparison. Figurative comparisons are creative, descriptive and interesting but not logical. It is like comparing apples with potatoes (a figurative analogy). The figurative comparison is found in cliches, idioms of informal prose and in simile and metaphors in

poetry and rhetoric. The Propaganda Institute's Devices are labeled in figurative language. The critical listener needs to be aware of the high connotative value of the figurative comparison, and its lack of denotative value.

In this message we have communicated about the history of public critical listening and a proposed criteria for training citizens in critical listening. The criteria includes the awareness of quantificative degrees of abstraction, attribution, qualification, and comparison. The appendices provide experiences to demonstrate the criteria.

## End Notes


Clyde Miller, Propaganda Analysis, (Institute of Propaganda Analysis !, November, 1937).

Wendell Johnson, People in Quandaries. (Harper, New York, 1946).

Charles Fries, The Structure of English. (Harcourt-Brace, New York, 1952).

Rudolph Flesch, How to Write, Speak and Think More Effectively (New York: New American Library, 1963).

C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, The Meaning of Meaning. Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovick, 1923.

Critical Listening Experiences for Training Citizens in Democratic Society

**Objective**: Participant will train in critical listening and recognize problems in believability and acceptance of messages.

**Procedure**: Facilitator reads statement below and participant will challenge statements according with principles established.

1. The skill of listening has liberated the working people from exploitation, the doldrums of monotony and the chains of oppression.
2. It has been suggested by many experts that the listening skill may be an important element in corporate advancement.
3. Critical listening is like hitting a golf ball. The conscious effort and practice, the better the skill becomes.
4. Some sources indicate that listening is like riding a bicycle in that once you learn, you never forget.
5. Julia Wood, Ph.D., suggests that there are some differences in the listening behavior of masculine and feminine genders.
6. Allegedly, faulty listening was the primary cause of WWI.
7. A few in the large crowd appear to have decided to disrupt rather than listen to the speech.

**Objective:** Student will evaluate a message based on its attribution source.

**Procedure:** Instructor will present message, listeners will ask three questions about attribution.

In the book, Frogs Into Princes, a Neuro Linguistic Programming by Richard Bandler and John Grinder, published by Real People Press, 1979, the authors suggest that eye behavior is extremely important in both psychiatric client relationships as well as normal interpersonal communication.

They contend, although they present no scientific data for support of the contention, that more important than words themselves is the processing of those words. It would appear that processing and the observation of that processing is more important than content itself. The authors state that the processing is usually at an unconscious level but is developed through a conscious awareness and practices. The processing of information by an individual takes place through the senses of sight, hearing and touch. The languages representational system is based upon each individual's means of processing.

In understanding another person with only written words available, an individual must find a counterpart of the others experiences that relate to his/her experiences.

Bandler and Grinder state that an individual will give cues to another by his nonverbal or his physical behavior, especially eyes. An individual relating to another will note that when one is visually constructing images the eyes will go up and to the right. If he is constructing images through feeling or kinesics the eyes will go right. If the individual is trying to remember through visual imagery, his eyes will go up and to the left. If he is remembering through auditory memory the eyes will go to the left and down.

The authors contend that by watching a client or another individual's eyes one can adjust to that individual's representational and reference systems and can relate to him/her by using words or examples similar to their representational system.

**Objective:** Student will question supporting evidence and attribution.

**Procedure:** Instructor reads the following composition and asks the listeners to ask three questions about the reasoning and three questions about the attribution.

Listening plays the primary and most important role in shaping our lives, society, culture, and civilization. Listening is the first language skill developed and bases of all others. Dr. Henry Gruby contends that a human fetus at six months is capable of beginning to develop listening skills. (Thomas Verny and John Kelley, The Secret life of the Unborn Child, New York: Summit Books, 1981 [p. 31]). Dr. Alfred Tomatis, a French physician, psychologist and ear specialists proclaims that four and a half months before birth our sense of hearing begins to develop and listening skill potential is initiated. Dr. Tomatis recommends music and "uterine dialogue" of speaking to the fetus to establish the basic listening skill which will influence other language skills, language acquisition, learning ability and social adjustment. (The Listening Centre Newsletter, Toronto, Ontario, 1987)

Dr. Tomatis contends that listening is an active process involving both a neurophysical ability and the desire to use and interest in training to develop that ability. The ability to listen and the motivation to listen precede and influence the acquisition and use of other language skills. When we learn to speak we listen and imitate those around us. When we learn to read, we listening is used to "sound out" the words. When we learn to write, we listen to the instructions. The skill of listening is basic in our personal development of language skills.

In the development of civilization, the skill of listening was developed before speech and centuries before reading and writing. Prehistoric humans developed their ability to listen first and through listening, the other language skills were developed. Even today in some human societies listening is the only receptive language skill.

I contended that listening is primary and therefore the most important language skill. Do you accept or reject the conclusion on the basis of the evidence provided.

**Objective:** Participant will label critical listening considerations.

**Procedure:** Read each statement separately and have listeners label problems.

1. Before the Republican Candidate criticizes the Democratic candidate, she needs to "sweep her porch first."
2. The bread of welfare is covered with the mold of socialism.
3. The President, "a bush leaguer," "dropped the ball" in the situation.
4. Many of the participants seem to have most of the votes.
5. If we do not rain soon, we may experience a drought.
6. Sometime ago, reliable sources were questioning V.P. Gore's listening ability.
7. Americans need to bend their ears toward the conservative side of the aisle.
8. It has been reported that good listeners make great lovers/.
9. Many were called but few listened.
10. You could possibly hear something to which you wouldn't want to listen.

**Objective:** Student will recognize and respond to statements as to their credibility and Acceptance

**Procedure:** Facilitator will read statements and ask students to (A) accept, (R) reject, (Q) question - write a specific question.

Respond to each statement below by (A) accepting, (R) rejecting or (Q) asking a question.

1. Critical listening skills are learned and can be improved through training.
   {A} {R} {Q} _____

2. It has been reported that humans can comprehend language spoken at a rate of 500 words per minute.
   {A} {R} {Q} _____

3. It would appear that many of you seem unwilling to commit yourselves to the improvement of your listening skills.
   {A} {R} {Q} _____

4. Listening, like reading, is difficult to teach because listening is a receptive language skill.
   {A} {R} {Q} _____

5. Many Northwest students voted in the student senate election.
   {A} {R} {Q} _____

6. I was really listening, but the lecturer was boring.
   {A} {R} {Q} _____

7. Listeners may attend only the sounds that are intense and immediate.
   {A} {R} {Q} _____

8. There appears to be a relationship between comprehensive listening and intelligence.
   {A} {R} {Q} _____

9. Several years ago the federal government recognized the importance of listening as a language skill competency.
   {A} {R} {Q} _____

10. A thirty d.b. hearing loss creates a 50% listening deficit
    {A} {R} {Q} _____

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